



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Daily Press Briefing

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TRANSCRIPT:

12:50 p.m. EDT

MR. BOUCHER: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's a pleasure to be here with you. If I can just make one note at the beginning, we'll have a statement for you, it's not fully written yet. But the Kuwaiti parliament just voted to give women the right to vote. We think this is an important step forward for Kuwait, for the women of Kuwait and for the nation as a whole. And certainly the ability of the women of Kuwait now to play a more effective role in the full political life of the nation is a good step forward and one for -- one that will help the people throughout Kuwaiti society and help women throughout Kuwaiti society.

So with that note, we'll get a statement to you a little later and it's all I have to say at the beginning. Be glad to take your questions.

Mr. Schweid.

QUESTION: Let me ask you, please, have there been a lot of words about Syrian insurgence that many feel were words about Iran. Could you attempt to give us the dimensions of the Iranian insurgency and how serious a problem it is as you try to move ahead in Iraq?

MR. BOUCHER: I don't know I can give you the dimensions of it. We have been concerned all along about undue influence by Iran in various ways in Iraq's politics or in supporting various groups within Iraq. You've heard a lot of this from Iraqi leaders themselves. And the Secretary, I think, you'll see in the transcripts as they come out that she talked about neighbors -- Syria and Iran -- during the course of her visit.

And I think the bottom line is that Iran's neighbors -- Iran's relations with people inside Iraq are not transparent and they need to be made transparent. They need to be normal relations, friendly relations between neighbors. But they shouldn't be in the nature of political influence. They should be in the nature of diplomatic relations.

QUESTION: In so far as fighting people -- fighting -- are people coming in from Iran into Iraq?

MR. BOUCHER: I really don't have any new information on that. As they are from Syria, I don't really have any new information on that, Barry.

QUESTION: Can I try -- you want to stay on that? You should make reference of --

QUESTION: Can I follow up on that?

MR. BOUCHER: Said.

QUESTION: Richard, why is it so difficult to determine, in a way, with a scale of one to ten, how much from Saudi Arabia, how much from Syria, how much Iran -- why is that so difficult? Because they, you know, they're caught, they're killed, and so on. Can you determine their identities just to see, you know, which country is exporting more of these fellows?

MR. BOUCHER: First of all, I'm not sure it makes a difference. We do try to determine the routes by which insurgents, terrorists and others get supplies, get support and get people and we try to cut those off. That's what you have to do. But as far as trying to give a numerical percentage of how many people came from here, how many came by there or how many came by there, I'm

QUESTION: Okay. And on the original flashpoint for the rioting, there were a group of about two dozen local businessmen and they were on trial for religious extremism, they were on charges of religious extremism. What's your view of those people, given the human rights situation and given all that you've said about, you know, democracy and the need for reforms? Well, are they extremists or were they just as local human rights people say --

MR. BOUCHER: I really -- I don't have a judgment on that particular point at this moment. I think you have seen in our Human Rights Report and elsewhere we felt that the tag of Islamic extremists has been used too broadly by the government and that there needs to be more respect for people who want to peacefully exercise their religion.

On the other hand, no one can deny that Uzbekistan has faced a problem with terrorism by real extremists who are violent, who are trying to overthrow the government and kill people. And those people need to be dealt with as well. So exactly where the line is, is obviously, a difficult question but we've felt at some points it was used too broadly.

So we definitely support the Government in terms of fighting terrorism, but we've also consistently urged the Government to undertake democratic reforms and allow people who have a peaceful view of Uzbekistan's evolution to find an outlet in the political system for that view.

QUESTION: Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has said that the government has said it would organize a trip for foreign diplomats to go to the area. Is the U.S. Ambassador involved in that?

MR. BOUCHER: I'm not aware of anything like that at this point. I'll have to check and see if anything like that materializes.

Yeah. We had others on this subject? Uzbekistan? We're done.

Jeanine, you get to change.

QUESTION: Do you have any comment on the conviction today of Mikhail Khodorkovsky of fraud and tax evasion and, sort of, is the State Department concerned of the impact this could have on foreign investment going forward?

MR. BOUCHER: At this point, I think they're partway through reading the verdicts and we will -- I think we'll look at the final verdicts in the case summation closely, once they're all out. We're aware that the ruling is complex. Mr. Khodorkovsky and Mr. Lebedev have the right to appeal, so there may be further legal action. But I do think it's important to remember that we've been concerned about this case all along and many actions in this trial and the Yukos Company case as well, the retroactive tax claims that exceeded revenues, the freezing of accounts so taxes can't be paid, the questionable auction of assets.

Many of these things are very serious questions about the rule of law in Russia, about the independence of the court, the sanctity of contracts and property rights, a lack of a predictable tax regime. So in addition to raising questions in the minds of many about the rule of law in Russia, they have also certainly raised questions in the minds of potential investors about the circumstances of their investments in Russia and I think fairly well documented, it had a chilling effect on investors.

Actions in this and other cases raise questions about Russia's commitment to responsibilities that all democratic free-market countries embraced. The conduct of the Khodorkovsky-Yukos affair has eroded Russia's reputation and eroded confidence in Russian legal and judicial institutions. We think it is in the Government of Russia's interest to act to assure the world that the institutional weaknesses highlighted by this case are going to be addressed in a timely and direct manner.

QUESTION: Can I change the subject?

MR. BOUCHER: Sure.

QUESTION: I don't know if you all noticed -- same thing?

MR. BOUCHER: Teri. Russia.

QUESTION: Oil-for-Food. Do you have any reaction to the new allegations that Oil-for-Food abuses went all the way to the highest levels of the Russian Government?

MR. BOUCHER: No, I don't -- not at this point.

QUESTION: Do you -- I mean, does the State Department have any --

MR. BOUCHER: We're very aware of the allegations. We'll certainly look at them, but I don't have any independent information on that.

QUESTION: Did you have it on -- oh sorry.

QUESTION: On Khodorkovsky.

MR. BOUCHER: Yeah.

QUESTION: On Khodorkovsky, that the Secretary warned Russia while she was over there that the United States would be looking very closely at the case. Do you detect, in any way, that Russian authorities have reacted to U.S. criticism of the case and has that been reflected in the sentencing?

MR. BOUCHER: Well, I don't think the sentencing has happened yet. I think the verdict is only partially read and there's more to come tomorrow, so I don't know if that will be the case or not. I think that's, in the end, a question you'll have to ask the Russian authorities, though, whether the concern of the outside world -- not just the concern that the United States expressed, but that many others expressed and that many in the business community have expressed, whether that was taken into account as they considered how to deal with this particular case.

QUESTION: A major (inaudible) of your relationship with Russia is what it's doing about rule of law and democracy and so --

MR. BOUCHER: That it is.

QUESTION: So I presume that when you see his sentence today, tomorrow, then you'll assess how your tactic is going, how -- if they're listening to you.

MR. BOUCHER: Well, I think you have to say that this case has gone on for a long time and that the verdict -- the sentences are only part of it. Indications are the verdict and the sentences are merely going to continue a long path that this case has followed that raises concerns at numerous junctures along the way and therefore, that when seen as a whole, this case has had a definite effect in shaking confidence in Russia and shaking confidence in the investment environment, shaking confidence in the rule of law. Russia will have to do things to try to reestablish that confidence and try to rebuild the integrity of its judicial institutions. In the long run, that's what ultimately will decide whether Russia can gain a reputation as a country where the rule of law prevails.

QUESTION: *USA Today* had an interview with Kofi Annan in which he sort of suggested not take Iran to the Security Council; it'll be a deadlock, it'll be hard to get action on Iran and North Korea. Do you -- that opens, you know, makes me think about whether you're closer to going to the UN. And is his analysis of a potential deadlock, meaning -- I suppose you don't have the Europeans onboard -- an accurate one, do you think?

MR. BOUCHER: Well, I think, first of all, I'm not going to try to comment on the article because I read the article and I couldn't quite understand what he said and what he meant. But second of all, I don't think the U.S. position has changed. We feel that those people who violate the nonproliferation treaty, as a matter of course, need to be referred to the United Nations Security Council. We've made that clear in the past. The Iranians are talking to the Europeans. They have thus far not broken the suspension of enrichment and conversion activities, but I think many have said that the -- if they were to do so, that one of the options is definitely to go to the Security Council. That's something that I'll remind you we have supported all along and we haven't changed our position.

QUESTION: You've still got a chip or two on negotiations?

MR. BOUCHER: That's a question for the Europeans.

QUESTION: No, I mean, the U.S. is still hoping negotiations --

MR. BOUCHER: We've supported the Europeans. We think it's time for the Iranians to come to terms and to comply with their desire. We think it's time for the Iranians to demonstrate to the world that they're not going to develop nuclear weapons and to do so with objective guarantees, as the Europeans say.

Okay, in the back.

QUESTION: But they have to decide -- Barry's question has a point, that one of your ideas is to take Iran to the Security Council where you presumably would have Britain and French support. What are you doing about talking to China, which has said we don't agree with sanctions?

MR. BOUCHER: I'm not going to start counting votes in the Security Council for something that hasn't gone there and hasn't been --

QUESTION: It's not hard to know where everyone is. It's not -- it's just Russia and China that you have to talk to.

MR. BOUCHER: There are 15 members in the Security Council.

QUESTION: Well, okay.

MR. BOUCHER: Right?